

# Study abroad: Cicero in Athens and Rhodes

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Studying abroad is not a new phenomenon. Travel with the purpose of deepening and broadening academic knowledge, receiving new cultural impulses, getting away from parents and the usual setting have been favoured in many societies throughout history. Also the Romans took to studying abroad. But what was it like to be a young Roman studying abroad and why did he leave in the first place? The case of Rome's greatest orator, Cicero, and that of his son Marcus, give us some answers and help us understand the underlying social and political aspirations of such a trip.

One of the more prominent and well-known Romans to travel for educational purposes was M. Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.), who was later to become a famous orator, politician, and writer of philosophical and rhetorical treatises. When Cicero was 27 and had already appeared as an advocate in a few high-profile court cases, he went on an educational tour of Athens, Asia Minor (the west coast of modern-day Turkey), and Rhodes. We know of this trip from later ancient authors, but mainly from Cicero himself, who described his stay in the East in a work on philosophy (*On the ends of good and evil*) and one on rhetoric (*Brutus*) both written more than 30 years afterwards. By the time he composed these works, it had become acceptable, almost fashionable, for young men of the upper class to go on a study trip to the East where the best teachers were to be found, but when Cicero set out it was less common to do so.

There is a famous story in Plutarch's *Life of Cicero* that recounts how Cicero successfully defended Sextus Roscius of Ameria in a murder-trial, but managed to offend the dictator Sulla in the same event. Cicero then, Plutarch says, decided to go abroad for a few years to avoid the wrath of Sulla. This story is now considered improbable, especially since Cicero himself describes how his hard work in the law courts had worn him down, and that he decided to go to East so as to improve his health through relaxation and his oratorical technique through study with the best Greek rhetoricians.

**Tour of beauty: Cicero's  
Mediterranean cruise**

Cicero started in Athens, where he went to lectures on rhetoric and philosophy. He was not alone: his brother Quintus and cousin Lucius were there as well, as were his friends Titus Pomponius Atticus (Cicero's life-long correspondent), Marcus Calpurnius Piso, and Servius Sulpicius Rufus. We can imagine them going to lectures together, having meals together, and enjoying free time in each other's company, much like students today. In a passage from *On the ends of good and evil*, Cicero recounts (or imagines) vividly one afternoon when they all went on a walk together to the Academy, Plato's school of philosophy placed about a mile outside Athens. They wanted to see the place where the famous Plato and his pupils conversed on philosophy. The encounter with the place makes the philosophers of the past almost appear before the eyes of the young Roman students; the place itself invokes a special sense of being together with great minds and intellectual heroes of the past. Cicero's inclusion of this little vignette in a long and fairly technical treatise expounding the views of three philosophical schools on the ultimate ends or goals in life seems slightly odd. Yet, the vignette helped him make credible his claim to know Greek philosophy through personal encounter, and supported his stated aim in writing philosophical treatises, namely to help a Latin-only audience get to know the teachings of Greek philosophy, partly for its own sake but mainly because he thought philosophical education necessary in a (morally) good orator and politician.

After Athens, Cicero went with Quintus

through many Greek cities on the coast of Asia Minor, where they studied with several rhetoricians before their final stop at Rhodes. Here Cicero met Posidonius, a Stoic famous for his broad-ranging knowledge, whose writings still exist in fragments. Rhodes had become an important centre for rhetorical and philosophical knowledge and Cicero's former teacher Apollonius Molon was one of the chief reasons. Indeed, the main motivation for Cicero's stop at Rhodes was to benefit from Molon's teaching again. In Cicero's opinion, Molon managed to retrain Cicero's oratorical style from one characterized by redundancy and excess to a more restrained and economical style which suited his physique and health better: 'In this way I came home after two years away not only in better training but almost transformed.' He could now deliver better orations without overstraining himself. Cicero's description of his study trip in his history of the (Greek and) Roman orators, the *Brutus*, is fascinating in itself, but is clearly aimed at placing himself not only within this history of ever more skilled orators but as the culmination of this development: through his own intense study of rhetoric and conscious emulation of past oratorical masters he has become the leading orator of his own time and the greatest Roman orator ever.

Cicero's description of his trip to the East focuses almost entirely on academic aspects. We do not hear where they slept or what they ate when travelling or staying in Athens and Rhodes. Such mundane details did not fit into his descriptions with their aims of putting his philosophical discussions in a proper setting and promoting his own philosophical credentials (*On the ends of good and evil*) or explaining his own rise to formidable oratorical brilliance (*Brutus*). Financial considerations are kept out of the accounts too, so we are left wondering who paid for this adventure.

## Cicero, the pushy parent

But we can get an impression of these practical aspects from a different yet related source, namely Cicero's correspondence with his son Marcus and

others, including Atticus, about Marcus' study trip. Marcus went to Athens in the spring of 45 B.C. to study rhetoric and philosophy, just as Cicero had done three decades earlier. Like many modern parents, Cicero paid for the whole trip: travel, maintenance, and fees to teachers, which was to be expected because Cicero, as head of the household, controlled the family's finances and Marcus did not have an income of his own. We can expect Cicero's father to have paid too for the study trip of Cicero and his brother. Cicero's letters show that he had financial worries about finding the means to support Marcus' stay in Athens. One thing was to secure the income necessary, mainly through rents from tenants in the blocks of flats owned by Cicero, but another was to limit Marcus' expenditure. A certain living standard had to be maintained for the son of a Roman senator for the sake of keeping up appearances, including holding dinner parties for friends and teachers, supporting worthy but less well-off friends, and having slaves to help with copying notes and other study-related expenses. Although Cicero does not want Marcus' living standards to lag behind that of other senatorial sons in Athens, he is also determined not to encourage too much partying at the expense of study through a too generous allowance.

It is perhaps natural that Cicero wanted to keep a rein on Marcus' expenses as he was paying for them, but Cicero was much concerned about Marcus' academic progress too. Cicero's nephew thought that he was a domineering father, and the letters do give us a sense that Cicero was very involved with Marcus' life as a student in Athens. He frequently asks Marcus' teachers for reports on his work, constantly writes to Marcus to ask for updates and to instruct Marcus which teachers to avoid, and has his other correspondents check up on Marcus and his academic diligence when they are in Athens. Most of them duly respond and although it must have been hard to live up to Cicero's high expectations, Marcus seems to have done his best. Indeed, Cicero's pride in Marcus' progress shows through in his letters to Atticus where he praises, and quotes, the elegant style in Marcus' letters.

Cicero's close attention to Marcus' life and studies in Athens may be seen as too invasive, but there were several reasons behind it. Firstly, Cicero always placed great importance on a good education; his son should not lack the opportunities he had had himself but must also make sure to exploit them fully. Secondly, Marcus was his only son and therefore Cicero's only hope for a continuation of the public profile of the family. Thirdly, Cicero's many letters worked as a substitute for his planned trip to Athens (44 B.C.), which he decided to abandon due to the political

situation after the murder of Caesar. Finally, through his correspondence about Marcus' education in Athens, Cicero could project himself as a responsible father, his family as part of the senatorial elite in which study trips to Athens were the done thing, and his son as on his way to a promising political career, for which oratorical and philosophical training abroad was an important step in the right direction.

We do not know whether Cicero's father kept such a close eye on his two sons when they toured Greece, Asia Minor, and Rhodes in 79–77 B.C., but we can perhaps infer that the expense of sending out two sons on a study trip for several years was a costly affair, that the sons were expected to make the most of their time in academic terms, and that they will have been in correspondence with their father (and others) about their studies and daily life. The afternoon scene at Plato's Academy gives us the impression that Cicero and Quintus enjoyed the company of other young Roman students, so the dinner parties of Marcus' letter will also have been part of his father's time in Athens. However, it seems safe to conclude that Cicero was more seriously interested in his studies than his son was. Marcus was neither the first nor the last student in history to experience his father's ambition on his behalf as a dominant element in his education, even when studying far away in Athens.

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